



EARLY ON! SCHOOL READINESS

Collaboration: The Essential Element behind School Readiness for Ready Children, Ready Families, Ready Schools, and Ready Communities

The City of San Antonio's Early ON! School Readiness program, through collaborations and partnerships, prepares young children to succeed as they enter school. Since the inception of the program in 2000, the core objective has been to support Early Childhood Education and Family Strengthening strategies by helping children develop communication, problem solving, and life skills important to future school and work success.¹

Research shows substantial racial achievement gaps between children as early as the pre-school years, which has a profound effect on their later life' successes.² Children who enter school not ready to learn continue to have difficulty later in life, affecting their school performance, becoming teen parents, engaging in criminal activities, and being unemployed as adults. Dr. James Heckman, Economist and Nobel Prize Winner, says it well, that "a lack of early skill and motivation begets a lack of future skill and motivation."

The premise of the School Readiness project being what children learn before entering school has a big impact on how well they do in school. This, in turn, has an impact on how successful they are as adults, all of which leads to a better economy and a better quality of life for all residents. Children Defense Fund reports that 33% of children enter kindergarten unprepared. Readiness refers to children being exposed to quality childhood experiences; schools gaining competencies to foster learning; and communities providing supports to children, their families, and caregivers.³ In 2005, this program completed its fifth year, serving a total of 97,259 participants.

¹ Please refer to the School Readiness Guidelines for an overview of these skills.

² Refer to <http://www.futureofchildren.org/homepage2824/index.htm>

³ Caregivers referring primarily to the informal system of care being provided to the children through family, friends, and neighbors (FFN) care.

Early ON! encompasses all 10 San Antonio City Council Districts. A major component of this project for the upcoming years is creating a system of collaboratives through partnerships and linkages representing each city council district. Additional collaboratives will be set up in council districts with a higher percentage of population with special needs. Thus, each council district will be the primary site for a Model School Readiness Collaborative-linked to community-based organizations, schools, neighborhood groups, parents, informal and formal caregivers, social service and health agencies, and other entities primarily serving the needs of the children between 0-5 years in age. Delegate agencies will be responsible for developing and managing the collaborative/s in each of the council districts.

The target populations for this project are children between 0-5 years of age; parents; family, friends, and neighbor (FFN)⁴ care providers; often referred to as informal caregivers, formal caregivers; and area schools. In FY 2006, the Department of Community Initiatives expanded the ongoing school readiness efforts by outreaching to informal caregivers in the community, not only educating and training them on the importance of school readiness, but also connecting them to resources that are available, but have not been accessed by them in the past.

The following are the critical outcome areas this project hopes to achieve in the coming years:

1. Supporting Early Care and Education to parents, informal care providers, formal providers, and schools so that they are knowledgeable about the developmental needs of children 0-5 years of age.
2. Providing Parenting and Caregiver Support through workshops, training classes, educational activities, community events, information sessions and referrals to appropriate agencies for multi-benefit enrollments, and connecting to systemic linkages already in place.

⁴ Informal caregivers refer to family, friends, and neighbors taking care of children in an informal set-up.

3. Referring to Health and Social Services in order to connect families and children to existing resources in the community- after all good health promotes early learning in children.
4. Helping Schools Achieve Readiness for children through effective parent and caregiver participation and input in the home-to-school/daycare-to-school transition plan, helping families in creating networks of support in the community, promoting collaboration between schools, parents, and the community for improved school outcomes.
5. Improving Coordination and Integration of services through effective communication so that children are ready, parents are ready; schools are ready and the community rallies for school success for children.

School Readiness success by the system of collaboratives is linked to the following activities, but not limited to them.

- School Readiness Outreach especially targeting isolated families and caregivers in the council districts who may not be knowledgeable of the developmental needs of young children.
- Parent/Caregiver/Community Education on school readiness, strengthening their capacity to better serve the children under their care.
- Interactive groups made up of children, parents, and caregivers, conducting events/activities targeting school readiness and spreading community awareness.
- Information and Referral linking families and caregivers to available multi-benefits.
- Parent/Caregiver Systemic Support Services for interaction, discussion, and networking opportunities for the participants in the council districts.

- Developmental Assessments of the participating children for identification of their school readiness skills; additionally, referring children with potential developmental delays to agencies that can help them.

Given the fact that collaboration is the key behind school readiness success, the following guidelines are instrumental for effective collaboration.

- Involvement of all key players in the council districts for effective community support.
- Taking ownership of the common vision for better school readiness outcome for children
- Building ownership of the common vision at all levels involving the area schools, area agencies and associations, parents, and caregivers.
- Establishing and keeping the lines of communication open between all the collaborators.
- Developing a work plan, that is cognizant of the capacity of the different partners in the collaborative.⁵

For more information, please contact the Office Of Early Childhood, Department of Community Initiatives at (210) 207-8139.

⁵ Refer to www.healthychild.ucla.edu; www.ccfc.ca.gov for more detail on working with a system of collaboratives.